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ABSTRACT

Mentorship programs are a promising approach to the professional development needs of new principals. The Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy provides professional development and collegial support for early-career principals in the primarily rural schools of southeast Ohio. For its 1999-2001 pilot program, 19 principals were organized into study groups at 4 sites. At each site, an experienced principal served as mentor to a group of entry-level administrators, each of whom also selected a coach for day-to-day assistance. Groups had considerable latitude in selecting issues to explore, but all groups addressed the data collection and analysis needed to complete a state-mandated portfolio. Findings from participant surveys and focus group interviews suggest that early-career principals in rural Appalachian Ohio valued professional development options made available to them, particularly when activities focused on practical administrative issues and involved interaction with mentors and peers. The Academy seems to have reduced rural principals' isolation through the establishment of networks with experienced mentor principals, peers from nearby districts, and a statewide group of colleagues. Participants valued the support of mentors, the structure of study group meetings, and study group discussions of practical problems. However, participants saw little value in the portfolio activities, thought it inappropriate to expect beginning principals to sponsor data-driven school reform, and did not see a need for an explicit rural focus for their professional development. (Contains 29 references.) (SV)

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Networking for the Nuts and Bolts: The Ironies of Professional Development for Rural Principals

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Background

With continued state and, more recently, federal emphasis on school reform and accountability, numerous commentators link school improvement to the leadership competence of principals (e.g., Peterson & Kelley, 2001; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Moreover, calls for reform direct particular attention to low-performing schools and districts, many of which are located in rural locales (see e.g., Carter, 1999). For this reason, some authors (e.g., Manges & Wilcox, 1997) argue that school administrators in rural communities need to learn how to become data-based managers, instructional leaders, and change agents.

Teaching school administrators to assume these roles may not be an easy matter. According to some commentators, however, professional development activities can help prepare principals for their new roles as stewards of data-driven reform (e.g., Bernhardt, 2000; Khanna, Trousdale, Penuel, & Kell, 1999). Despite this rhetoric, little systematic work has been directed toward developing and testing the effectiveness of professional development initiatives that prepare principals to carry out school improvement (Hallinger & Murphy, 1991). Of the few initiatives that have been undertaken, most address the needs of urban and suburban principals (see e.g., Grover, 1994; Nudson & Devries, 1979), and very few address the special needs of rural principals (cf. Reaves & Larmer, 1996).

Nevertheless, rural administrators may have even more pronounced professional development needs than their urban and suburban counterparts. They tend, for example, to be less well educated than urban and suburban administrators (Barker & Muse, 1983; Reaves & Larmer, 1996); they certainly are more isolated than principals in other locales (Erlandson, 1994; Stern, 1979); they are required to assume a wider range of roles than other principals (Erlandson, 1994); and, increasingly, high turnover rates make it likely that many of them will be new to their jobs (see e.g., Wilson & Heim, 1985). Efforts directed toward the needs of early career administrators in rural districts seem, therefore, to be particularly germane.

Mentorship programs provide one promising approach to addressing the needs of principals, especially those new to their jobs (Cohn & Sweeney, 1992; Grover, 1994). Although some statewide efforts are underway, most mentoring programs for early career principals have been instituted in urban and suburban districts. Few systematic programs for the professional development of rural principals – using either mentoring or other approaches -- have been undertaken. Reports from the few programs that have been established (e.g., Flanagan & Trueblood, 1986; Reaves & Larmer, 1996) suggest that rural administrators seem to benefit from professional development that is voluntary and collaborative.

The present study provides findings from the evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy, a professional development initiative for early career principals in rural Appalachian Ohio. It addresses the following broad research questions:

- what approaches to professional development do early career principals from rural districts find most useful?
- what strategies do mentors use to foster the professional growth of early career principals from rural districts?

- in what ways are the self-reported professional development needs of rural principals different from those of principals in other locales?

Review of Related Literature

Two very small bodies of literature provided insights relevant to the conception and evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy. Both bodies of literature – the literature on the professional development of rural principals and the literature on mentoring of early career principals -- primarily included descriptions and evaluations of professional development programs. Little systematic research has been conducted to explore the nature, quality, and outcomes of the professional development offered to (or required of) school administrators, especially those who work in rural schools.

Professional Development of Rural Principals

Descriptions and evaluations of professional development programs for rural principals focus on several important themes. They point out the importance of networking and the value of efforts that bridge the distance among isolated school administrators. They also report that voluntary programs seem to work better than mandatory ones. There seem, however, to be contradictory opinions regarding the benefits of school-based in contrast to broad-based initiatives, with programs of both types reporting benefits.

For rural principals, the ability to exchange ideas with peers (i.e., "networking") seems to be an extremely important feature of professional development initiatives (Costa. 1979). Networking is enabled in some initiatives through inter-district collaborations, distance learning technologies, and summer institutes (Peterson & Kelley, 2001). Alaska's Rural School Leadership Network, for instance, provided opportunities for rural principals to get together in face-to-face sessions as well as through various kinds of telecommunication technologies. According to one participant, "face-to-face contact with your peers has been an idea that one could only wish for – a friend who knows you and has experienced the same situations" (Cline as cited in Hagstrom, 1987, p. 32).

In Texas, The Effective Schools Project (ESP) combined regional networking with school-based improvement (Reaves & Larmer, 1996). Teams of principals and teachers met periodically on the Tarleton State University campus and returned home to work on reform initiatives in their schools. Program directors saw collaboration (including school-university partnering), school-based improvement, and voluntary participation as important conditions for ESP's success. An evaluation of the program revealed high satisfaction by participants, relatively consistent follow-through with program activities, and tentative evidence of improved student achievement.

Another program especially designed for rural educators also involved teams of teachers and administrators (Flanagan & Trueblood, 1986). This program was intended to increase teachers' use of instructional innovations, improve staff attitudes, and bolster the level of trust among teachers and administrators. The evaluation of this program provided some evidence that the collaborative activities undertaken by participants did produce the intended effects.

With few (and relatively unsystematic) empirical studies, it is certainly premature to make many generalizations about what might constitute effective professional development for rural principals. Clearly, additional research is warranted. Tentatively, however, voluntary programs that enable principals to collaborate with peers and thereby reduce professional isolation seem to have some merit.

Curiously, no studies have examined the ways that professional development programs for rural principals have addressed specific local circumstances (cf., Costa, 1979). This gap in the literature is, perhaps, not surprising: Reform initiatives tend to reflect state and national agendas. Nevertheless, because school leadership is practiced locally, attention to locally responsive reform (and professional development to support it) might represent an important research focus.

Mentoring of Early Career Principals

A growing body of literature recommends mentoring as a beneficial method of socializing pre-service as well as early-career principals (Daresh, 1988; Ehrich, 1994; Grover, 1994; Pence, 1989; Westhuizen & Erasmus, 1994). Mentoring is purported to reduce professional isolation (Dussault, 1995), provide principals with continuous feedback (Pence, 1989), and increase the skill levels of new principals (Daresh & Playko, 1992). Mentoring programs differ, of course, in terms of the nature of their sponsorship, the groups they serve, the types of individuals recruited as mentors, and the goals they seek to accomplish (Pence, 1989; Westhuizen & Erasmus, 1994).

Despite prescriptive literature supporting this approach, few studies have examined its effects. Among the few empirical studies was a small-scale evaluation of a mentoring program for suburban and rural principals in Quebec. The study used a pretest-posttest design to test the program's effects on principals' feelings of isolation and on their network building (Dussault, 1995). The program involved six group meetings "in which a trainer present[ed] theory and skills, furnish[ed] simulated practice, and provid[ed] structured feedback and coaching" (p. 6). The researcher found that the mentoring program reduced principals' feelings of professional isolation. It did not, however, improve their "networking." Neither information nor friendship networks of participants increased significantly as a result of participation in the program. With only six months between the pretest and posttest, however, principals may not have had sufficient time to develop strong networks.

In partnership with Bank Street College, various New York City school districts participated in a somewhat more elaborate program in which newly assigned principals received support from retired principals, who served as advisors, and worked directly with experienced but still practicing principals, who served as "buddies" (Grover, 1994). Evaluation of the program involved a survey of all elementary school principals who participated, focus group interviews with selected participants, and some in-depth interviews. Results showed that most principals found the program helpful, indicating that they particularly appreciated what they learned about (1) the school system, (2) administration and supervision, and (3) communication. They also thought the program reduced their sense of isolation and helped them to establish networks.

Two studies of the Illinois Administrator Academy, with participants who were mid-to-late- rather than early-career principals, yielded similar findings (Ashby, 1993; Illinois State Board of Education, 1991). In this program, mentors assisted 100 principals who volunteered to work on personal improvement plans. Not only did participants report that the activities completed under the direction of their mentors reduced their isolation and expanded their networks, they also claimed that these activities helped them make sense of the role of instructional leader. In particular, they found that their improvement plans assisted them in establishing and cultivating school-wide missions and in using student achievement data to monitor progress toward school improvement.

As with the empirical literature on professional development for rural school principals, the literature on mentoring of early-career principals is too small to offer clear support for any generalizations. Overall, however, the extant studies do suggest that mentoring may increase collegiality among principals, reducing their isolation and giving them access to networks of peers and advisors.

Program Overview

The Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy is part of a professional development initiative for Ohio's early career principals. The initiative was designed to provide support to newly hired school leaders and to prepare them to complete portfolios based on Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. According to the state-level sponsors of the program, the activities included in the portfolio strengthen principals' competence in instructional leadership by requiring them to attend systematically to data about their schools.

With funding from the legislature, the Ohio initiative provided non-competitive grants to consortia of universities and other partners that were willing to establish pilot programs. Altogether five regional programs received grants.

Coordinated by faculty at Ohio University with assistance from members of the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools, the Southeastern Regional Principals Academy serves the early career principals in the primarily rural schools of Southeast Ohio. For its 1999-2001 pilot program, staff recruited 19 principals, organized into study groups at four sites. At each site, an experienced principal served as mentor to a group of two to six entry-level administrators. Each entry-level principal or assistant principal also selected a coach, upon whom he or she could call for day-to-day assistance. Each study group set its own schedule but met for a minimum of eight full-day (or 16 half-day) sessions. The participants and mentors from the Southeastern program as well as those from the other programs throughout the state also attended conferences held each summer in Columbus.

Although coaches and statewide conferences provided some support, the small study groups served as the primary vehicle for professional development. Groups had considerable latitude in selecting issues to consider and in choosing preferred approaches for exploring those issues. One group, for example, spent time reading and reflecting on control theory. Another group spent several sessions discussing issues related to school law and policy.

The one common feature of the professional development undertaken across all groups was the attention paid to the data collection, analysis, and interpretation needed for completion of the ISLLC portfolio. Required to complete four portfolio components[1] by the end of the program, each participant had an interest in using study group sessions to learn about the portfolio. Moreover, program staff provided a variety of resources directly related to portfolio development, including one-on-one "tutoring" sessions, on-line materials, and text-based materials. Nevertheless, the practical problems encountered in the principalship seemed to participants to be more important than the portfolio and, as a result, tended to take precedence in determining the focus of study group discussions.

Methods

The evaluation used both qualitative and quantitative methods, and was both formative and summative in design. From February 2000, when the Principals' Academy activities began, until August 2000, evaluation activities focused on providing formative feedback to program staff so they could make adjustments as needed. These formative evaluation activities consisted of (1) documentation of the procedures for selecting mentor principals and recruiting new principals and assistant principals into the program, (2) observations of study groups, and (3) brief study group questionnaires.

Evaluation during the second year focused on several measures of overall effectiveness and impact of the program. The second year evaluation also sought to provide the program's state-level staff as well as state policy makers with information about the usefulness of both mentoring and portfolios as forms of professional development for educators who are new to the administrator role. Summative data were collected around the following themes: mentorship, study groups, portfolio development, and statewide policy. To the extent possible, qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments and procedures mutually enhanced and expanded on these themes in order accurately to reflect the achievements of the program as well as the benefits and issues associated with this program's approach to professional development. Specific data collection methods are discussed below.

Study Group Questionnaires

During the first 11 months of the project, brief open-ended questionnaires were sent to mentor principals, who were instructed to distribute them to entry-year principals for completion at the conclusion of each study group meeting. (A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.) Questionnaire items focused on the relevance and effectiveness of specific activities undertaken during each study group meeting. Completed questionnaires were mailed back to the evaluators for analysis. The evaluators analyzed these data at the end of the Academy's first year and provided summary statistics to program staff.

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[1] Each portfolio component consisted of a set of five standard "prompts" to which participants were required to respond. Altogether there were six components, but participants were required only to respond to four of them. Two components were required, and two others were optional. The required components were: "Facilitating the Vision of Learning within the School Community" and "Sustaining a Culture Conducive to Student Learning." Participants selected two other components from the remaining four: "Understanding and Responding to the Larger Context," "Collaborating with Families and Community," "Supporting Professional Growth and Development," and "Organizing Resources for an Effective Learning Environment."

Observations of Study Groups

Once meeting schedules were well established, the evaluators visited three study groups to learn about their structure, the processes they used, and the content covered in their meetings. Three study groups, one at each of three sites, were observed. The evaluators took notes during each visit and developed a summary describing what took place during the session.

Participant Surveys

The evaluators designed comprehensive surveys and administered them to mentors and participating early career principals. The surveys were similar across groups but also included items specific to each group. Items focused on major themes pertaining to the professional development of principals, as determined through a review of relevant literature.

The mentor survey elicited information about mentors' overall impressions of the Academy, their perceptions of the study groups, and their relationships with the early career principals participating in the program. In addition, the survey asked mentors to rate policy alternatives based on their experiences with the Academy. The participant survey elicited similar information from the early career principals. Demographic information was collected from both mentors and early career principals.

Surveys were mailed to all active participants and mentors in February, 2001. Two weeks after the initial mailing, follow-up letters were sent to those who had not responded. This method achieved a response rate of 100 percent of both early career principals (N = 19) and mentors (N = 4).

Focus Group Interviews with Study Groups

To elicit additional information, the evaluators conducted focus group interviews with participants from two of the four study groups. Results of the participant surveys were shared at the focus group meetings, and the principals were asked to clarify and elaborate survey findings and to bring up other relevant matters concerning the professional development provided by the Academy, such as the quality of their relationships with mentors, coaches and peers; the value of study group discussions; and the usefulness of the portfolios. Questions used to guide the focus group interviews are provided in Appendix B. The evaluators tape recorded focus group sessions and transcribed the tapes.

Data Analysis

The evaluators calculated frequencies for demographic items included on the questionnaires. They also calculated frequencies of response choices as well as means and standard deviations for the items relating to program features and policy options. By sequencing the means from highest to lowest, they were able to ascertain the program features and policy options that respondents' thought were most important and those they thought were least important.

With regard to the analyses of qualitative data obtained from observations and interviews, the evaluators organized information by collection method, respondent category (i.e., mentor or early career principal), and study group. Then they looked for salient themes that appeared

within and across these groupings. Because there were few differences across study groups and because they wanted to assure respondents' confidentiality, in most cases the evaluators combined responses from all study groups. In one or two cases, responses from different groups were markedly different, and the evaluators took note of (and provided commentary about) these variations in perspective.

Results

Analyses of evaluation data provided information about respondents, their perceptions of the Principals' Academy, their ratings of the Academy's most important features, their assessment of the effectiveness of mentors and study groups, and their views about the relevance of the curriculum. These findings are presented below.

Participants

The Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy attracted 22 early career principals to participate in the two-year pilot program, and employed four mentors. Most participating principals also selected a local coach, whom they consulted informally about day-to-day concerns. By the end of the pilot program, only 19 participants were still actively participating.

The mean age of mentors was 49, with ages ranging only from 48 to 50. Three of the four mentors were males. All mentors were white, and all had attained the Master's degree. Mentors' years in education ranged from 16 to 29, with a mean of 25 years. Only one mentor reported living in the community in which he or she worked, and this respondent had lived in the community for 45 years.

The mean age of early principal participants was 42.5 (SD = 6.12), with ages ranging from 31 to 51 years. All participants were white, and approximately 47% (N = 9) were female. Most had received a Master's degree (95%), with only one holding just the bachelor's degree. Entry-year principals had worked a mean of 15.73 (SD 7.78) years in education, with a range of 1 to 29 years. Slightly more than half (55.6%) of respondents reported that they did not live in the communities in which they worked. For those who did live in their school communities, the range of years in residence was 3 to 50, with a mean of 27.67 (SD = 19.84). Most respondents (89.5%) reported that the schools they served were in rural areas.

Participant Perceptions of the Southeast Ohio Principals Academy

Early career principals' general assessments of the Academy are presented in Table 1. Among the positively worded items in this section of participant survey, the item indicating that the Academy provided opportunities for networking with other first and second year principals and assistant principals in Southeast Ohio received the highest mean rating from participants (M = 3.47, SD = .77).[2] Most respondents (94.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that this had been the case.

[2] All ratings were based on a 4-point Likert-type scale in which 4 represented "strongly agree," 3 represented "agree," 2 represented "disagree," and 1 represented "strongly disagree."

Table 1: Entry-Year Principal Participants' Overall Perceptions of the Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy

As a professional development program, the Principals' Academy . . .	N	% Agree	% Disagree	Mean	SD
provided opportunities for networking with other first and second year principals and assistant principals in Southeastern Ohio	19	94.7	5.3	3.47	.77
has provided professional support at a convenient location	18	88.9	11.1	3.17	.62
*is too closely tied to an education agenda established at the state level**	*18*	*72.2*	*27.8*	*3.06*	*.80*
provided opportunities for networking with principals who have a great deal of pertinent experience	19	73.7	26.3	3.00	.75
has staff members who have assisted me to the extent I needed or requested assistance	19	68.4	31.6	3.00	.82
helped me understand better what it means to be a reflective practitioner	19	73.7	26.3	2.79	.71
has given me insight into the nature of my local community	19	57.9	42.1	2.74	.87
has staff that responds to my needs for assistance and information quickly	19	68.4	31.6	2.68	.82
provided opportunities for networking with other new administrators in other areas of the state or elsewhere	19	66.7	33.3	2.67	.69
has given me opportunities to collaborate with various members of the educational community	19	57.9	42.1	2.63	.76
has staff that truly seems to care about helping me learn how to complete my portfolio well	19	63.2	36.8	2.63	.83
*did not provide me with as much information as I needed**	*19*	*47.4*	*52.6*	*2.58*	*.84*
*has taken too much of my time**	*19*	*47.4*	*52.6*	*2.53*	*1.02*
has helped prepare me for the numerous roles I must fill as the principal/assistant principal in a small or rural school	19	52.6	47.4	2.53	.70
has staff that truly seems to care about helping me become a better administrator	19	57.9	42.1	2.53	.90
*has provided me with few tools for initiating important school change**	*18*	*50.0*	*50.0*	*2.44*	*.78*
has provided me with valuable print resources	19	52.6	47.4	2.42	.84
has held workshops that were well worth my time	19	52.6	47.4	2.42	.69
has given me access to valuable Web site resources	19	42.1	57.9	2.32	.82

* *Negatively worded item*

Participants also tended to agree (73.7%) that the Academy had provided opportunities for networking with principals who had a great deal of pertinent experience (M = 3.00, SD =

.75). In addition, the Academy was reported by 68.4% of respondents to have staff members who assisted participants to the extent needed or requested ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .82$).

In contrast to these positive ratings, respondents were less enthusiastic about the degree to which the Academy provided them access to valuable on-line resources ($M = 2.32$, $SD = .82$); only 42.1% agreed or strongly agreed with this item. Respondents also held disparate opinions about the value of the print resources and the workshops provided by the Academy ($M = 2.42$, $SD = .84$ and $M = 2.42$, $SD = .69$, respectively). Moreover, they tended to believe that the Academy was too closely tied to a state-level agenda for educational reform ($M = 3.06$, $SD = .8$).

Critical Program Features

One item on both the participant and mentor surveys requested participants to review a list of 11 features of the Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy and rank the three features perceived to be most critical to the program. Table 2 presents the percentage of the 23 respondents ranking any given feature anywhere among the top three, as well as the percentage of those ranking a given feature as most critical, second most critical, or third most critical.

The three features identified by the program's participants as most critical were (1) mentors working with small groups, (2) coaches to help with day-to-day problems, and (3) inclusion of principals and assistant principals. The first two critical features relate to the program's support system, and both make reference to the support provided to novice principals by experienced school leaders.

As shown in Table 2, mentorship was the feature ranked as most critical to the program's effectiveness. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (69.6%) ranked this feature as the most important. More than half of respondents (60.9%) ranked the assistance of coaches with day-to-day problems as among the top three most critical features of the program, and nearly half (47.8%) ranked the inclusion of both principals and assistant principals as among the top three.

Table 2: Participant Rankings of the Importance of Each Program Feature

Feature of Program	*% Ranking Feature in Top 3*	*% Ranking Feature as Most Critical*	*% Ranking Feature as Second Most Critical*	*% Ranking Feature as Third Most Critical*
Mentor to work with small group	82.6%	69.6%	8.7%	4.3%
Coaches to help with day-to-day problems	60.9%	13%	34.8%	13%
Inclusion of principals and assistant principals	47.8%	8.7%	26.1%	13%
Written materials on portfolio development	34.8%	8.7%	13%	13%
Statewide Summit with all Entry-Year participants	34.8%	0	8.7%	26.1%

Written materials on school leadership	17.4%	0	13%	4.3%
Written materials on continuous improvement planning	8.7%	4.3%	0	4.3%
Web site	8.7%	0	0	8.7%
University expert on school management	4.3%	0	0	4.3%
Writing coach	0	0	0	0
Listserv	0	0	0	0

An item on the surveys also asked participants and mentors to explain their reasons for ranking the program features as they did. Replies to this open ended query did not result in explanations of rankings per se; rather, respondents described their reasons for choosing program features without regard to the rank they gave each. Hence, the following analysis presents participants' responses categorized by program component rather than by rank.

Sixteen respondents in all reported that the mentorship was among the three program features most critical to the Academy's success. Nine respondents explained that *mentors were a source of support otherwise not available* to them as they undertook their first years as school administrators. As one respondent put it, "[H]aving a mentor during year one and two provides [the] opportunity for discourse about struggles, decision making practices, and victories."

Six of these nine also framed their comments about the usefulness of mentors within the context of the *support provided by the study groups*. As one participant explained, "New principals would benefit greatly from a support group made up of a few new principals and a mentor. It provides an opportunity to get advice on current issues from other professionals, and it is the perfect time for reflection—reflection that most likely would not occur outside this group setting. Unfortunately, principals do not have much time for reflection, so being 'forced' to meet and reflect on situations and problems is very valuable."

Three comments about the value of mentors addressed the way in which mentors *helped to alleviate the isolation* many school administrators confront. "Teachers now have a mentor/entry year support. Principals need the same support. When you become a principal, you are 'on your own,'" as one respondent wrote.

Two replies were more general, but nonetheless positive: "Mentorship is essential. How better to learn if you are doing your job or how to better learn from your job?" and "If the program is going to continue, the mentors are a real benefit." Another respondent praised the mentor-mentee relationship, noting, "I could not have become as successful as I have without a mentor...I don't see that type of relationship or learning in some programs."

Eleven respondents cited the availability of coaches to assist new principals with day-to-day problems as one of the three features most crucial to the Academy's effectiveness. Four of these respondents, however, did not elaborate on their reasons. According to two respondents, coaches offered practical perspectives on the experience of the principalship. As one put it,

"Coaches with help for day to day [issues] is *much* more important than spouting numbers, facts, ratios, etc." According to two respondents, coaches served as valuable sources of information, ideas, and feedback. In the words of one participant, "A coach to discuss problems with would be helpful. It's nice to hear someone else's opinions." The remaining responses with regard to coaches were idiosyncratic. One reply suggested that the individualized support from a coach was helpful: "Any type of one-on-one coaching by an experienced administrator would be beneficial." Another respondent indicated that coaches reduced isolation, writing, "[A] coach would be very important for principals who are alone in a building."

Nine respondents indicated that the inclusion of both principals and assistant principals was vital to the effectiveness of the Academy. One respondent argued that principals and assistant principals needed to work closely together, and thus participation of both in the Academy was useful: "Since building principals are often out of [the] building, assistant principals working through portfolio process allows opportunity for understanding of how [it] all works. The principal/assistant principal should be a close relationship; therefore to have worked through [the] process would benefit both positions." Another reply simply noted that "assistant principals really need the help too." A third respondent wrote, "can share problems or concerns in a small group setting which should include both principals and assistant principals."

Focus group comments further supported survey respondents' opinions regarding the essential role of a mentor for new principals. Several participants believed that mentorship for new principals should be required by the state: "Require mentors for new administrators. Notice I didn't say portfolios. The first year you're out, you feel like you are all alone...you need the support." Participants in focus groups also emphasized the importance of including both principals and assistant principals in the program. As was the case among the survey responses, focus group responses showed participants' strong preference for the features of the program that stressed relationships and practical guidance and their weak support for the features (e.g., text-based and web-based materials) that focused on the portfolio task.

Effectiveness of the Use of Mentors

Program staff chose the four mentors from a group of 22 principals, who were recommended by the program's Advisory Board. Selection was based on a comparison of each principal's qualifications with the description of the mentor's role. All were experienced administrators who agreed to carry out the responsibilities involved in mentoring entry-level administrators toward a better understanding of the role of the reflective practitioner and toward completion of a portfolio. The mentors planned an agenda for each study group, arranged for facilities, and previewed materials prior to the study group. During each study group meeting, the mentors facilitated discussion of practical leadership issues and helped the participants identify methods and materials for responding to the portfolio prompts. First-year observations of three of the study groups indicated that the mentors had established positive relationships with their groups. The participants seemed to feel at ease with the mentors and felt comfortable asking for their advice and assistance.

One section of the surveys for mentors and early career principals, which were administered during the final six months of the program, included items pertaining to the mentor-

mentee relationship. Table 3 presents aggregated responses to the items in this section, with both mentor and new administrator viewpoints included.

Table 3: Responses from Mentor Principals and Entry-Year Principals Evaluating the Mentor-Mentee Relationship

To the following extent, the mentor principal with whom the new administrator worked has...	**Entry-Year Administrators**		**Mentors**	
	Some/Large Extent	**Mean**	**Some/Large Extent**	**Mean**
Shared personal experiences relevant to the new administrator's work.	100%	3.89	100%	4.00
Conveyed empathy for the concerns and feelings the new administrator discussed with him or her.	100%	3.84	100%	4.00
Shared history of his or her career with the new administrator.	100%	3.84	100%	3.75
Conveyed feelings of respect for the new administrator as an individual.	100%	3.74	100%	4.00
Served as a role model.	94.7%	3.74	100%	3.50
Displayed attitudes and values similar to those of the new administrator.	89.5%	3.58	100%	4.00
Discussed the new administrator's concerns about his or her relationships with personnel.	100%	3.58	100%	3.75
Encouraged the new administrator to talk openly about anxiety and fears that distract him or her from work.	100%	3.53	100%	4.00
Discussed the new administrator's concerns about how to integrate work responsibilities and family life.	94.7%	3.26	100%	3.50
Showed the new administrator how to be a reflective practitioner.	79%	3.11	100%	3.75
Discussed with the new administrator how external conditions and politics at higher levels in education could affect the school.	79%	3.11	100%	3.50
Gone out of his or her way to promote the new administrator's career interests.	73.6%	3.11	75%	3.00
Encouraged the new administrator to try new ways of behaving on the job.	79%	2.95	100%	3.75
Encouraged the new administrator to prepare for advancement.	79%	2.95	100%	3.50
Helped the new administrator finish assignments/tasks or meet deadlines that otherwise would have been difficult to complete.	57.9%	2.63	75%	2.75

As these data indicate, Academy participants tended to report that mentors performed most of the tasks listed on the survey to some extent or to a large extent. All new administrator participants reported that their mentors had shared personal experiences relative to their work, conveyed empathy for the concerns and feelings of the new principal, shared the history of their careers with mentees, conveyed feelings of respect for participants, discussed participants' concerns about personnel relationships, and encouraged participants to discuss anxieties and fears that might distract them from work. By contrast, only 57.9% of participants reported that their mentors had helped them finish assignments or meet deadlines that would have otherwise been difficult to complete. Mentors assessed the extent to which they performed the various tasks even more positively than did participants. Mentors reported that all but two tasks had been performed to some or a large extent.

Effectiveness of Study Groups

The study groups appeared to be a useful feature of the Academy. Results of on-site observations of three study groups, questionnaires completed by participants at all sites, and informal interviews with mentors indicated that the study groups were effective in providing discussion time for solving problems that arose in the daily work of the new principals and for identifying and conducting activities necessary for the completion of portfolio components.

Participants answered survey items relating to the value of the study group sessions led by their mentor principals. Table 4 presents a summary of responses to these items.

Most respondents (94.7%) agreed that their mentor principals tried to assure that all participants' opinions were heard ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .76$) and that other study group participants listened to each other ($M = 3.53$, $SD = .77$). Most (94.7%) also concurred that study group facilities were adequate ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .77$). Many (89.5%) agreed that there had been ample opportunities for questions and discussions during study group sessions ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .84$), and many (84.2%) also agreed that the mentor had kept instructional sessions on task ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .87$). Although the majority of participants (89.5%) supported the statement that instructional events and activities had been informative, this item received a somewhat lower mean rating ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .74$), suggesting that respondents tended to agree rather than strongly agree with the assertion.

Early career principals were less positive about the extent to which instructional activities and readings had been focused on the development of high quality portfolios. Only 63.2% of respondents agreed that this had been the case, with a mean item rating of 2.63 ($SD = .83$). Nearly three-quarters (73.7%), however, agreed that study group materials could be useful to all principals, experienced or not. The mean rating for this item was 2.79 ($SD = .54$).

Table 4: Participant Perceptions of Study Groups

Perceptions of study groups	*N*	*% Agree*	*% Disagree*	*Mean*	*SD*
The mentor principal at the instructional sessions tries to make sure that everyone's opinions have been heard.	19	94.7	5.3	3.63	.76
Other participants in the group have listened to what I have to say.	19	94.7	5.3	3.53	.77
The facilities for the instructional sessions have been adequate.	19	94.7	5.3	3.42	.77
There have been ample opportunities for questions and discussion at the instructional sessions.	19	89.5	10.5	3.42	.84
The mentor principal has kept the instructional sessions on task.	19	84.2	15.8	3.26	.87
Being involved in the instructional sessions has been valuable to me.	19	84.2**	10.5**	3.24	.674
The instructional events and participant activities at the instructional sessions have been informative.	19	89.5	10.5	3.11	.74
I have understood the intended purposes of the instructional sessions.	19	84.2	15.8	3.00	.75
The materials provided in the instructional sessions would be useful to other beginning principals.	19	78.9	21.1	2.95	.62
What I have learned at the instructional sessions has helped me to develop skills that are relevant to my work.	19	78.9	21.1	2.89	.57
The instructional activities and readings have included materials and discussion about how to be an administrator in a rural area.	19	78.9	21.1	2.89	.74
The materials provided in the instructional sessions could be useful to all principals, whether new or experienced.	19	73.7	26.3	2.79	.54
The instructional activities and readings have been well focused on how to develop a high quality portfolio.	19	63.2	36.8	2.63	.83

*** An additional 5.3% (N=1) of respondents provided a rating of 2.5 for this item, although this was not a response option offered on the survey. The responses of 2.5 are not included in the percent agree disagree columns but are included in the calculation of the item mean scores.*

Focus group data supported observational and self-report data. The study group of new administrators led by an experienced mentor appears to have been considered by all focus group participants to have been the most professionally and emotionally supportive feature of the program, and a recommended strategy for new administrator support programs generally. Representative quotes from focus groups are included below.

- "The cohort concept is excellent. I love the discussions with my peers."
- "Meeting together is what's important. It's very important. It's the most important part of it. It's kind of like we all found out the grass isn't any greener on the other side. The same problems that I'm having in my area, he's 15 or 50 miles away, and we all have the same discipline problems."
- "I think we found out there are lots of things that you questioned in your mind, and we found out that others were thinking the same thing, and that these were reasonable things to discuss."

Effectiveness of Use of Coaches

Coaches were selected by each participant, and the amount of advice and assistance they provided varied. Among the factors that influenced this relationship were whether the coach and early career principal were in the same school. In cases in which the coach was in a different school from the participating principal, there seemed to be much less time given by the coach to his or her role. In part because the mentors were available and responsive to participants, the coach's role may have been less crucial to this program than it might have been if mentors had been less accessible. In fact, during the second year of the program, there was very little comment by the early career administrators on their interactions with coaches. The mentor and peer study groups appeared to have become the main support system for the new administrators.

Relevance of Curriculum to Early Career Principals

In general, the curriculum for the study group sessions varied by group because the interests and experiences of the mentor and the participants at each site differed somewhat. Requirements of the ISLLC portfolio provided a common discussion thread across sites, but even these discussions took on a particular character at each site. In fact, the ISLLC portfolio constituted the official curriculum of the Academy, with discussion topics and print materials designed to assist participants in producing high quality responses to the portfolio prompts. These prompts required participants to gather, analyze, and make sense of information about their schools and communities. The unofficial curriculum, however, consisted of discussions related to the practical work of the principalship. Although Academy staff asked each mentor to use study group sessions to support work on the portfolios, most groups seemed to devote more attention to the "unofficial" rather than the "official" curriculum.

Responses to the surveys suggested that participants were reasonably satisfied with the content and format of the study groups. Participants, however, found that the study groups were less helpful than they might have been in presenting the skills and knowledge needed by

principals in order to develop high quality portfolios. In focus group comments and survey replies, participants explained that they did not want the portfolio to be the main focus of study group meetings because there were other pressing issues on which they needed guidance from the mentors and discussion with their peers. Nevertheless, they seemed to be saying that the quality of the instruction that had been devoted to portfolios could have been improved.

Nuts and Bolts: The Unofficial Curriculum

Focus group participants listed various topics they thought were most important to the new principals involved in the Academy. Several respondents talked about "core competencies," related to the on-going responsibilities of school leaders. According to a number of participants, the curriculum of the Academy ought to address practical issues and the competencies needed to deal with them. Practical issues of this type did tend to dominate discussions, despite efforts of program staff to get study groups to pay serious attention to the ISLLC portfolio.

One principal reported, "Every time we get together, there are certain things that come up. And I know darn well that most principals, if not all principals, deal with the same things, have the same thoughts, have the same questions...So, you could come up with literally a list of issues to discuss that would be relevant to every principal because we all in some way deal with legal issues, we all deal with discipline issues...we all deal with personnel issues."

Legal issues were certainly a major concern of one study group. As a participant from that group put it, "One of the things we always end up talking about every time we're together is, because it's so necessary, are legal issues. And young principals, because they haven't experienced some things...you don't want to be standing in a situation that could come up at any minute, and say, 'Oh, well, excuse me, let me go call someone.' But the laws change so quickly, and the circumstances change so quickly it would be nice to have someone from that arena...and come to speak to each group, or at least put bulletins out, updates."

Other important issues, according to some participants, concerned personnel: "hiring practices ... human resource issues." One participant noted that, at the study group's first meeting, participants compiled a list of tasks they would be required to complete during their first year as administrators. "The first thing that came out was evaluations, that we would need help and support on that right away," reported the interviewee.

Respondents also identified other practical issues that were the focus of principals' concern. For one participant, special education issues were relevant. According to another, "budgeting is another big thing [because] you can get your foot in a financial mess, real quick." Another thought that learning how to coordinate a school's schedule of classes was an important topic.

The Portfolio Requirement: The Official Curriculum

Despite participants' lukewarm reception of the ISLLC portfolio, they were required to complete four components by the end of the two-year program. Therefore, study groups did spend some time attending to this official part of the Academy curriculum. Nevertheless, participants' misgivings about the portfolio were reflected in responses to survey items related to state policy. Two items in particular focused on the portfolio requirement. (See Table 5.)

Table 5: Project Participants' Opinions on Policy-Related Survey Items

Item	% Agree	% Disagree	Mean	SD
The completion of a portfolio should not be required of first-year administrators.	95.7%	4.3%	3.78	.52
The portfolios being developed in this pilot phase will eventually contribute to increasing the overall competence of principals in Ohio.	39.1%	60.9%	2.04	.88

Although mentors and entry-year principals almost unanimously agreed that portfolios ought not to be required of first-year administrators, their views about the overall benefits of the portfolios varied. Whereas approximately 61% thought that the completion of the ISLLC portfolio would not contribute to the overall competence of principals, almost 40% thought that it would.

In response to an open-ended question on the survey, respondents provided more substantive commentary about the portfolios. Although the majority of respondents (12 out of 19) reported that the portfolio had not been useful, their reasons varied. Several respondents offered more than one reason for questioning the value of the ISLLC portfolio.

Six participants reported that the portfolio took too much time to complete during an especially busy period in their professional lives. According to one principal, "The portfolio is another job for individuals who are extremely busy." Four respondents noted that the portfolio was not highly relevant to their experiences or to the issues they were confronting during their first years as administrators. One respondent wrote, "The portfolio or the intended purpose of the portfolio needs to be re-examined. Besides the first component, which I do find to be valuable, I see relatively little relationship between my current responsibilities as an assistant principal and what I am required to write about for the rest of the portfolio." Two respondents simply wrote that the portfolio was not helpful. One respondent argued that the portfolio diverted study group attention away from important issues; another commented that it was difficult to become "motivated" to write the responses to the portfolio prompts.

By contrast, two respondents claimed that the reflection encouraged by both the study groups and the portfolios had been valuable features of the Academy. As one such respondent phrased it, "This program has caused/forced me to address areas I would not have addressed in my first year, especially A1 [the portfolio component called "Facilitating the Vision of Learning within the School Community]."

Focus group comments supported survey findings. Participants often reported that they were concerned with practical, "hands-on" issues that the portfolio did not address. For instance, one participant commented, "They just want us to raise those test scores. And that isn't even addressed in the portfolio. And discipline issues. And identifying bullies and depression." Another also expressed concern about the relevance of the portfolio: "The portfolio ... isn't even in the circle of our job. It's over there, and our job is here." A focus group participant synthesized the concerns of the early career principals in his study group: "I guess . . . our focus

is on the more practical, hands-on things." Another participant reiterated the majority view about what the Academy's curriculum ought to include: "practical, hands-on, get-me-through-the first-year-so-I-can-survive stuff."

Rural Responsiveness

Because the Academy was explicitly organized in ways that were thought to be responsive to the needs of rural principals, program staff sought feedback about the extent to which participants actually viewed the program as helpful in addressing the needs and concerns of rural educators. To some degree, findings about the study-group structure of the Academy answered the questions raised by staff. The evaluators, however, sought more specific information by asking direct questions of participants.

In particular, the evaluators asked focus groups, comprised of participants and mentors from two study groups, whether administrators in rural areas confronted different issues from their peers in urban schools, and would therefore require an Academy curriculum that specifically addressed rural concerns. The members of one focus group reported that a balance between curriculum that addressed their particular rural contexts and concerns and curriculum that offered them additional perspectives from quite different locales was important to the success of the Principals' Academy. One interviewee, for instance, noted the significance of the study group's attention to rural issues: "There are regional issues...There are common problems that are experienced in our business. And I think probably no matter where you go safety issues are a concern. But one of the things I've noted is that issues that were hot topics in Ironton are maybe different topics here. So I think there's some regional-ness that plays into the process that would be lost if locale wasn't thought about." Another reported, "I think that [having study groups with principals from similar locales] is very important because people from inner city schools have very different problems than people from rural areas."

Participants in the other focus group did not think that locale was especially important. As one new principal explained, "Whether we're in big schools or little schools, big areas or little areas, we're still working with kids, we're working with parents. Kids are kids, parents are parents, systems are systems, rules are rules." The members of this study group seemed to believe that the socioeconomic status of their communities was the more important commonality: "What might be a little common thing is that we're from fairly non-affluent areas."

Furthermore, members of this focus group also considered the experiences and views of principals from more urban areas as important to the curriculum of the Academy. As one principal put it, "I think we spend the bulk of our time within our region. I think that at least once or twice during the year [it would be good] to meet with like a larger region, just to get a different perspective on other things going on. Just because we're in a rural situation now doesn't mean we're going to stay in a rural situation." Similarly, another participant reported that ideas shared by urban school principals "may trigger something in our mind we might never have thought of."

These comments suggest that rural responsiveness may involve more than simply using Academy curriculum to address the special concerns of rural schools. Rural principals seem to value discussions with peers who share the rural experience but also to benefit from discussions

with a wider group of peers. Professional development for early career principals in rural schools might need to involve opportunities for both kinds of "networking."

Discussion

Findings from this evaluation suggest that early career principals in rural Appalachian Ohio value professional development options made available to them, particularly when activities focus on practical administrative issues and involve interaction with mentors and peers. As with other professional development initiatives (e.g., Costa. 1979; Peterson & Kelley, 2001), the Southeastern Regional Principals' Academy seems to have reduced the isolation experienced by administrators in rural schools.

Moreover, the reduction in isolation was accomplished through the establishment of networks – with experienced "mentor" principals, with peers from nearby districts, and with a statewide group of colleagues (cf. Dussault, 1995). Contact with professionals within these networks appears to have enabled early career principals to seek practical advice, reflect on pressing issues, and experience solidarity with peers who faced problems similar to the ones they were facing. Two features of the Academy seemed to be especially productive of these support networks: mentoring and study groups.

As the prescriptive literature on administrative mentorship claimed would be the case (Daresh & Playko, 1992), early career principals who participated in the Academy appreciated the support offered by their mentors. Mentors' support took the form of specific practices, with the most typical of these being: sharing personal experiences relevant to the new administrators' work, conveying empathy for the concerns and feelings of the new administrators, sharing the history of their own careers, showing feelings of respect for the early career administrators, and serving as role models.

Equally important to the early career principals who participated in the Academy were the study group sessions. Participants seemed to value the structure of study group meetings, with agendas and activities organized and facilitated by their mentors. And they also appeared to value the free exchange of ideas among peers that the study groups enabled. They also appreciated study group discussions that focused on practical problems and seemed to resent the time taken away from such discussions for work on the ISLLC portfolios.

Study groups have also been found elsewhere to be an effective method for supporting new leaders. Abbott, Goldman, and Golden (2001), for example, found that study groups provided an effective vehicle for providing pre-service instruction to aspiring school administrators, and Murphy (1991) and Mohr (1998) reported on the effectiveness of this approach with practicing school administrators.

Whereas mentoring and study groups were features of the Academy valued by participants, portfolios were not. Neither participants nor mentors saw the connection between portfolios and daily administrative practice. Furthermore, many participants failed to see the purported linkage between the portfolio activities and school improvement. Even among those who did acknowledge the linkage, however, almost no one thought that the early years of a

principals' career were appropriately spent considering such matters. Rather, they expressed the view that early career principals needed to figure out practical management techniques and focus attention on the problems encountered on a daily basis.

These findings raise questions about the practical wisdom of expecting early career principals in rural schools to sponsor data-driven reform initiatives. These principals appear to need support in learning how to manage day-to-day routines. They hardly seem ready to confront persistent dilemmas or to envision and enact meaningful change. Reform initiatives, where desirable in rural districts, might best be undertaken by principals with more extensive experience.

Moreover, the findings also cast doubts about the receptivity of rural principals to professional development curricula explicitly focused on rural schools. Whereas the principals in the Academy responded positively to arrangements that accommodated their relative geographical isolation, they did not seek out resources specifically designed to help them work in rural schools or with rural communities. In fact, many did not seem to believe that rural principals faced challenges that were very much different from those faced by principals in other locales.

The Principals' Academy, like many professional development initiatives, originated as a statewide program and positioned itself to foster the types of school reform associated with state-mandated accountability. Although they thought the ISLLC portfolio was not especially relevant and that the Academy was too closely tied to a state-level reform agenda, participants – early career principals and mentors – accepted the need to improve test scores in their schools. By and large, however, they did not believe that the first years of a principal's career could reasonably be devoted to school improvement. From the perspective of Academy participants, principals had too much to learn about routine school management to undertake instructional leadership early in their careers.

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Appendix A

Study Group Questionnaire

1. Were the purposes of the session made clear?
2. Were today's activities worthwhile in terms of the purpose of the session?
3. Which activity did you find most helpful or interesting? Briefly explain why.
4. Which activity did you find least helpful or interesting? Briefly explain why.
5. Were the facilities conducive to the purposes of the session? If not, briefly identify any problems with the facilities.
6. Are you leaving the session with a clear idea about what is expected of you, as a participant in the project, prior to the next session?

Appendix B
Questions Used in Focus Group Interviews

1. What Academy staff support has been most useful to you during your participation in this pilot program?
2. What other staff support would have been helpful to you?
3. For future Academies, how important is it to you that the study groups are geographically near to you? How important is it to you that other participants in your study group are from rural areas? For what reasons?
4. Based on your experience in the Academy, what strategies for providing general support to new administrators would you suggest to policymakers?
5. If portfolios become mandatory, what strategies would best support new principals in completing them?
6. Time seems to be a concern for new administrators as they work on the portfolios. What supports would help new principals deal with the amount of time needed to complete the portfolios?
7. What information or support would have better helped you work on your portfolio?

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